



In-flight education

A new breed of international student commuters is growing at UK universities. Jessica Shepherd reports

Tuesday April 10, 2007

[The Guardian](#)



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Student Eurocommuter, noun, a person who studies at a UK university during the week and takes the first economy flight home to Europe at weekends

Their laptop case squeaking under the strain of carrying this week's handouts, next weekend's clothes and a PC, the student Eurocommuter is fast becoming a familiar sight on campus. Almost a sixth of first-year UK university students from European countries other than Britain plan to visit home "often". That is what they told pollsters Opinionpanel Research, which quizzed almost 300 of them last November. And "often" now means as regularly as once a week.

Budget airlines, with their cheap and frequent flights, make a Eurocommute financially and practically possible for many students. Modular degree courses, which make timetables more flexible, also play their part. So, too, do the completion rates, which are higher at British universities than at European ones.

If you add to those factors the fact that university places at European institutions outside Britain are becoming scarcer and that our degrees take less time, it is not difficult to see why this breed of student Eurocommuters has come into existence.

But some say they show, most of all, how highly prized degrees from British universities, and qualifications taught and assessed in English, are. "The UK brand of higher education is highly popular and well respected across the world," says Professor Les Ebdon, vice-chancellor of Bedfordshire University. His institution - a five-minute taxi ride from Luton airport - attracts many student Eurocommuters.

"It might seem unusual to some, but Eurocommuting is fast becoming regarded as normal, particularly for postgraduates," says Dr Paul Temple, a lecturer in higher education management at the Institute of London. "This is part of the internationalisation of higher education.

"There is now the feeling that graduates need to show they have an international perspective, whether they want to work for the private or public sector, and taking a degree abroad is a good way of doing that."

But is UK higher education doing something wrong if so many of the 74,000-odd EU students on undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses jump on the first flight home every weekend?

"I don't think it's particularly to do with UK higher education that they go home at weekends," says Temple. "They may well have family commitments of various kinds, say, or even work commitments - and, of course, they may not go back every weekend."

Yet surely these Eurocommuters make it harder to create a student community on campus? "On the contrary," says Ebdon. "They bring the global village into the university and contribute a lot to university life. Students are choosing to study eight miles closer to home every year. Without these Eurocommuters, they would not get so much out of university."

Life on the move

Most people find studying for one full-time undergraduate degree enough. Simar Selezov is doing two - and in different countries. He is currently studying for a BA in marketing at the University of Bedfordshire and an economics degree at the Tallinn

University of Technology in Estonia. Selezov, 22, is in his third year of both degrees and will graduate from both institutions this September. He travels between Tallinn and Luton two to three times a month.

"It is very challenging to do two degrees. My friends think I am a bit crazy, but I do it because England is one of the most important centres in Europe for finance and I thought it would be a great challenge to study here.

"It works well. Our approach in Estonia is more theoretical; in Bedfordshire, it is more practical. The overall experience is excellent. Luckily, in Estonia, university timetables are very flexible and the university moved things around for me.

"But being a Eurocommuter is certainly not easy and it is expensive. I have friends I stay with when I am in Luton, and friends who work for easyJet, so I get a discount. Two of my Estonian friends have a house and I pay them rent when I am there. The government pays for my degree in Estonia because I got a scholarship. I also have a bursary.

"The advantage is that I know about travelling and how to manage my time. In the future, if I work for an international company, I could be a very good manager of international affairs.

"I have to plan very carefully when I am going to be able to do everything. I also feel that Stansted airport is my home. I have been there between 30 and 50 times in the last year. I almost always have my laptop wherever I go. I read lecture slides in the airport. Sometimes I email tutors and send assignments from there. Of course, I have to stop when the plane takes off and lands."

Journey: bus to Tallinn airport, flight to Stansted, coach to Luton, walk. **Time:** 5 hours 20 minutes. **Cost:** approximately £700 a month.

Carla Clé says being a Eurocommuter is more worrying than glamorous. The 24-year-old from Antwerp, Belgium, is in the third year of her PhD, but studies at the John Innes centre at the University of East Anglia. She goes home every three to four weeks to see Jan, her partner of two years.

"The centre here is scientifically much better than what we have in Antwerp, but I get fed up with my eurocommute. It is not just the 45-minute flight, it is the waiting in the airport. There is always the worry that you might miss the train or plane. I used to take my PhD work and look at it in the airport. You always think you'll be able to do it. Now I have realised I can't, and I take a magazine.

"I try to make up the time I have lost travelling by working the weekends when Jan and I don't see each other.

"I think being a Eurocommuter does affect your social life at university. I miss parties in Norwich and in Belgium. And I feel that I live nowhere.

"There are more and more Eurocommuters, because the world is getting smaller and young people want the independence that living abroad as a student gives. I feel completely independent and faced with a culture that challenges my preconceptions. Another good thing is that the Eurocommuters begin to recognise each other at the airport and we make friends."

Journey: bus to Norwich airport, flight to Amsterdam, train to Antwerp. **Time:** 6 hours. **Cost:** between £125 and £250 a month.

Svenja Kreyenhop commuted between her home town of Bremen in Germany and Luton last year. The 25-year-old was studying for an advertising and marketing communications degree at the University of Bedfordshire. It was linked to her course at the Academy for Marketing and communications in Hamburg.

"Some of the Chinese students said that they were jealous of me because it was impossible for them to go home so easily. Fortunately, easyJet started offering flights that were very convenient for me just a few months before my studies in Luton started. I used to have a boyfriend back home and I was also playing hockey for my German team. I commuted back and forth, every weekend sometimes, and very often every fortnight.

"I would go straight from university to the airport to catch my flight home on a Friday evening and only return to Luton late Tuesday evening. So sometimes I would only actually stay in Luton for three nights before going back home.

"Going back home meant staying back at my parents' place, on their expenses. When I managed my time badly, it was due to laziness, not the commute."

Journey: taxi to Luton airport, flight to Bremen, car home.
Time: approximately 2 hours. **Cost:** approximately £40 a time.

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